

Interviewee: Aarti Shah

Interviewer: Rolf Killius & Lata Desai

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SUMMARY

Aarti Shah, an actor and founder of South Asian artists, discusses her heritage and experiences. Born in Wembley to parents from Kenya and grandparents from India, she explores the challenges her family faced adapting to British culture, including language barriers and racism. Aarti reflects on her own identity struggles, balancing British and Indian cultures, and the importance of representation in media. She highlights the need for more education on colonial history and the representation of South Asian stories in art and film. Aarti also expresses hopes for future political representation and opportunities for South Asian creatives.

Outline

Aarti Shah's Background and Family History

- Aarti Shah introduces herself as an actor and the founder of South Asian Artists, a platform for supporting and networking South Asian artists and creatives.
- Aarti was born in Wembley, northwest London, and her parents were born in Kenya but moved to the UK for better work opportunities.
- Aarti's grandparents moved from India to East Africa for similar reasons, and her parents left Kenya for the UK due to political unrest and better opportunities.
- Aarti's parents and grandparents faced significant challenges adapting to a new culture, language, and dealing with racism in the UK.

Challenges of Adapting to British Culture

- Aarti's grandparents struggled with the language barrier and finding familiar groceries, which was a significant challenge.
- Racism was a major issue, with Aarti's father being called racist names by young people in the UK, which was a shock compared to their experiences in Kenya.
- Aarti discusses the impact of her family's migration on her identity, noting the balance between British and Indian/Gujarati cultures.
- Aarti felt a sense of not fitting in either culture, leading to a period of questioning her identity and feeling embarrassed about her culture.

Identity and Cultural Balance

- Aarti identifies as British and Indian, emphasizing the importance of embracing both cultures.
- She discusses the challenges of code-switching between different cultures and the embarrassment she felt about her culture when she was younger.
- Aarti has experienced direct racism, such as being called a racial slur at Cambridge, which made her more aware of her color and the presence of racism.
- She notes the importance of representation in media and the progress being made in casting roles that do not solely focus on race.

Parental Support and Language Barriers

- Aarti's parents were supportive of her acting career, despite initially wanting her to pursue a more stable degree.
- Her parents sent her to a theatre arts school, which helped her develop her acting skills.
- Aarti's grandparents and parents faced significant language barriers, with her father having to take special classes to learn English.
- Aarti can speak some Gujarati and Swahili, but she is more fluent in understanding than speaking these languages.

Cultural Identity and Representation

- Aarti discusses the importance of teaching colonial history in schools to increase awareness and understanding of racial tensions.
- She notes the lack of representation of South Asian history in education and media, which has improved somewhat but still needs progress.
- Aarti's platform, South Asian Artists, aims to support and connect South Asian creatives and provide opportunities for representation.
- She emphasizes the importance of art and media in educating people about South Asian history and culture.

Personal and Professional Aspirations

- Aarti hopes to see more politicians who represent her values and those of her generation.
- She wants to see more education about South Asian history and migration in schools and museums.

- Aarti aims to be in stories that represent South Asian history and characters where race is not the central focus.
- She hopes to grow her platform, South Asian Artists, and continue to create opportunities for South Asian creatives.

Aarti Shah 00:12
So I'm Aarti Shah. I'm an actor, and I also run a platform called South Asian artists, which is a support and networking account for South Asian artists and creatives and just sort of all round creative I'd say. I was born in Wembley, northwest London, and while my parents, they were born in Kenya, they came here when they were young and then myself, my brother, were brought up in northwest London, and grandparents from from India.

Rolf Killius 00:48
Can you elaborate that you know any stories of your grandparents how they survived in East Africa, You know, something like that?

Aarti Shah 00:54
Yeah, so, um, I think they were also my grandparents were very young when they came to East Africa, so that in Kenya, I think the main was just sort of work opportunities. Why that specific reason why they came? I think a lot of their family already around there. So they came and they set up their life there. And then, yeah, my mom and dad were sort of very little actually, when, they left Kenya.

Rolf Killius 01:23
Do you know the reasons why they came from India to IEngland?

Aarti Shah 01:26
Yeah, I was, I was talking to my mum and dad about this specificall.y it's interesting. They can't remember too much. I think the main reason they came was to do with with work opportunities, I think just sort of a better life, that's what they recall. And I think because a lot of their family had already moved over there, they sort of, they decided to join. That was, yeah, their sort of main reason for moving.

Rolf Killius 01:54
And do you know where the Why do your parents left the circumstances there?

Aarti Shah 02:02
Yeah, so my parents left Africa. I think it was at the time in Kenya, they kind of wanted a lot of the sort of South Asians out, and it was a choice between coming to the UK or going back to India. And I think they just, I think, for, I guess, a better life. They thought that the UK would be better than sort of going back and just sort of more opportunities. And I had this conversation last night, and that's, that's what they were saying, just just more kind of

opportunities. But they were very young, so they don't remember sort of all of the details, but they remember, like, some some of it.

Rolf Killius 02:42
So they came with their parents?

Aarti Shah 02:44
Yeah, they did, yeah, yeah, yeah. So my grandparents. They came with them when, when they were very young.

Lata Desai 02:50
Have you ever talked about any challenges or hardships, or whether it was easy to settle in Britain?

Aarti Shah 02:58
They, Yeah. They have. I think it was, it was very hard. I think particularly for my grandparents. I was talking to them about this, and my mum, I think the main challenges was just adapting to a complete new culture, different language, different way of living, and and not knowing the language. So there being that language barrier, even things like groceries obviously. Even in Kenya, they were used to finding Indian groceries, but here they weren't. So there was, there was that struggle and obviously racism that they faced. My mum was saying that that my bapuji, my dad's dad, I think, you know, back in Kenya, in India, they weren't used to sort of young people calling them names, racist names. And I think they just had to, unfortunately, become, become used to that. And I think he would be too scared to walk outside, because these young people would sort of call him all these sort of racist names. So I think it was that that shock that they didn't experience anywhere else.

Rolf Killius 04:04
?o you feel you have you got your own life was influenced by the fact that your grandparents and parents came from India, East Africa.

Aarti Shah 04:18
I think it massively because it's for us and my generation, we were born here, so obviously my parents and grandparents weren't. So I think it's adapting to this again, balancing these two different cultures and ways of lives, obviously the British side and then Indian Gujarati side. And I think there's a lot of expectations that that come with that, and this whole fitting in, it's interesting actually, because when I was younger, I didn't, I was so naive to it all. I didn't, I didn't know it was a thing. And, you know, as we are so innocent, and then slowly, as I grew up, I was like, I. Okay, this is, oh, I don't really kind of fit in here. And I started to sort of question my identity. There's a sort of famous quote that a lot of people say, for example, too white for the Indian people and too Indian for white people. And it's that kind of, you know, you don't know where that middle ground is in terms of fitting in. So as I was growing up, I started to feel embarrassed of of my culture, and obviously that's that's not nice, because

I wanted to embrace it, and now I feel I've sort of started from escaping the culture to starting to embrace it now..

Lata Desai 05:38
How do you identify yourself?

Aarti Shah 05:42
That's a, that's a, really, I love that question. It's, I mean, obviously I'm, I'm British, Indian, that's how I identify myself. I'd say, obviously I'm an actor, I'm a creative but I think sometimes we become over complicate identity because, you know, I'm a human being, and I think there's so much to to me and to humans than their sort of race, their identity and their culture. Obviously, it's important, but that is how I identify, just as a human being, try to sort of battling the these two cultures, and in terms of sort of my identity as an artist. Yeah, I sort of try and create work that that kind of represents us, represents our identity and culture. So that is that's a big part of my identity to me.

Rolf Killius 06:33
Did you ever did anybody question that you belong to this society here, that you are foreign? Or foreign, rich, and you look slightly different or might be different,

Aarti Shah 06:48
Yeah, a lot..... Unfortunately, a lot of times when I think I went to Cambridge, I recall just sort of walking with my cousins. It's not the most diverse place there. I think this was one of the first times where I experienced direct racism. I think we were walking and this guy was like, Oh, hello, tans. And we were just in shock. And it was just something that none of us had ever experienced before. We didn't know. My cousin shouted them, but I was just, I was quite young at the time, and I was I didn't really know how to how to react. And again, it was the first time I sort of experienced that. And I think in some of the recent race riots and all of that, I think that's the first time I've actually been more aware of my colour. I'd never actually thought about, you know, I take trains a lot, and I was just so aware that people were looking at me, and my colour just became so much more important than it had ever been. And it just made me question. It's like, oh, the person sort of sitting next to me could be that racist? The person sort of walking past, and that's, unfortunately, I think there's still a lot of unhealed, I guess, trauma from from those race rights, where people, even to this day, I'm still, it's kind of struck me, where I'm questioning my identity again. And obviously you shouldn't, shouldn't be like that.

Rolf Killius 08:14
Yeah, we were just talking about that. Anybody question you, you know, it's, it's, it's not just racism. The direct is this kind of, this idiots on the streets that people actually ask you to, yeah, where do you come from? For instance, you know, some people ask you, yeah, directly, yeah. People question do you belong to this place?

Aarti Shah 08:36

I've never actually, luckily had that, you know, typical, where are you from, or where are you sort of really from? I've experienced sort of people asking my parents, you know, coming across as friendly, but then you can tell, I mean, saying, Where are you from, compared to where are you really from, it's complete different questions. And we have had that, and my parents have a clever answer, and they keep just saying, Yeah, UK, because it's why should we have to tell them when they're not accepting the answer we want to give them? But yeah, I'm yet to have that question myself, but my parents really have a good way of handling that question.

Lata Desai 09:14
You're in a really difficult profession - acting..... I mean, do you feel that you only get South Asian roles, or you try to get into any kinds of roles?

Aarti Shah 09:32
It's, I'd say it's a mix. It's definitely getting bette. I think. When I started out professionally, most of the roles were where the character is, where race is centric to the character. And that's the most important thing. I think once I had a commercial request and it just said Indian girl, and I was like, fair enough, they want to use that. But then you would never see, for example. caucasian girl written, there's, there's so much more to us than our ethnicity. So I think the wording sometimes needs to be changed. So yeah, I think when I started off, it was that, but now it's, it's a mix which is really good to see. What I'm seeing now, there are still sort of the stereotypes that we're trying to move away from, but now, when I get an email, it's been so refreshing to see where, yeah, they want someone to use, who's Indian or South Asian, but the character their race isn't the most important thing, and it could be anyone playing that. So they're just trying to be more open with the casting. So yeah, it's getting better, but still, I am still getting roles where it's just Indian, and I just want to see where race isn't mentioned, because that's how it should be and how we should be progressing.

Aarti Shah 10:05
The same direction, a little bit different take. You are an actress, you know, and how, how was the discussion in your family? You decided?

Aarti Shah 10:57
See, I always make this joke with my parents, because I blame them. They actually sent me to stagecoach theatre art school every Saturday from the age of seven to 17. So I always say they're the ones who got me into it. Yeah, they've been really, really supportive. I think when it came to choosing a degree that I wanted to do, my dad was a bit like, you know, do the acting, but as the degree, maybe something more stable. So initially I was thinking of doing drama with psychology, because it's a bit more stable. But then when I was researching, I was like, No, I need to do acting because it's so much more practical, and I'm going to get all the tools that I need to progress as an actor. And once I had that conversation, he was very understanding. And my mum, when I went to stagecoach, she signed me up for their agency. So when I was younger, I got a few jobs from there, but yeah, they have been really, really supportive. And I think it's so important, especially for South Asians, to have that, because a

lot of us don't, because it's sort of the question is, I think when we're younger, we didn't see ourselves represented on screen. And I think because we are seeing more of us now, parents are being like, Oh, well, they can do it. My child can. So I think more and more parents are becoming more open minded to it.

Rolf Killius 12:24
You are a little bit talking about the language and the background and your grandparents. I think who couldn't speak not enough English. How is the language important? If you think about your parents and grandparents' generation migrating to this country.

Aarti Shah 12:44
Yeah, I guess it's, it's a difficult one, because I guess for them to fully integrate themselves into this society and also to be able to work and communicate, I think there is that sort of level of English that I guess for them is helpful for them to have, but then it's like they weren't taught that there. So it's, it's not like they're gonna come here straight away understand English. It's, it's takes a lot of time to learn it. I think when my dad came here, he didn't know a word of English and it, he had to go to sort of special classes to learn it. And I think it's, it's very hard when you're not taught that from a younger age. So, yeah, I think it was very hard for them to adapt. Even now, my grandma, her English is really good, but generally she with other people. It's not best. We would have to sort of translate. So even now, it's, you know, not sort of full English.

Rolf Killius 13:41
And what about you? speaking Gujarati or Swahili as well?

Aarti Shah 13:48
Yeah. So, yeah, I know a few bits of Swahili. Funny, actually, because when I was younger, I didn't know that some of the words were Swahili, so I thought they were all Gujarati because they sounded similar. My parents were like, oh, no, that's Swahili, and it was a bit of a shock to me, but yeah, I'd say, I'm semi fluid. I actually knew more when I was younger. There's videos of me talking Gujarati, and then lost it a bit. Had some lessons, did it at GCSE, so now I can understand it more than I can speak. I'd say, so, yeah, semi fluent.

Lata Desai 14:21
To dig a bit, dig deeper into this question of identity. You were born in Wembley, which is quite a very Asian, and then you live in Leicester. Again, you are very much. But have you ever felt a misfit in this country like and did you feel that you have to conform to the English way of life because you said something that you were embarrassed about your culture. So did you change anything about yourself?

Aarti Shah 14:49
Yeah, I guess you know, I'm very lucky that I did grow up in a majority South Asian culture and background otherwise, I think it would have been a lot harder. But having said that, even though I know that most people around us look like us, I would still be worried. Say, you

know, if we were going to an event like wearing my sari in public when there were non South Asians about sort of just feeling looks on us. I remembered my mum when we went to, like, service stations, when, again, the majority weren't South Asian. I just think remember that I was just so embarrassed when she took her naasto out, and I was like, I shouldn't, shouldn't be feeling like this. And I also have lived in the north a bit, where it's not as diverse, so I have felt it there. And I have have felt myself code switching, which is, you know, switching between the different cultures. And I don't mean to do it, but I think naturally, instinctively, I do that. So yeah, there have been times where I've had to sort of, I guess, tone down parts of my identity and say, if we're speaking Gujarati in public, I've been when I was younger, embarrassed about that, but now I'm I'm not. I don't care about it as much. But yeah, I'd say it's gotten a lot better as I've grown up. But when I was younger, I definitely I felt had to, had to conform. And at uni as well, a lot of my course mates weren't Indian. So there as well, I felt myself sort of having to fit in.

Lata Desai 16:22
Do you ever go to India? Do you do you go to India or Africa at all?Africa at all?

Aarti Shah 16:31
I've never actually been to sort of Kenya or East Africa. I've been to India twice, but I was very young then.I was about, I think, 11 and then 12, so I don't really remember it too well. I really, really want to go back now, just because I think when I went, when I was younger, I enjoyed it, but I think I didn't appreciate it the way I would now, and I think with the knowledge and appreciation that I have of my culture. I really, really want to go back to Gujarat and see what it's like and just accept it more now with that knowledge compared to when I was a kid. Yeah. So really, really, I've been saying to my mum, I was like, Can we go back?

Lata Desai 17:18
Do you feel they teach colonial history in schools? And are people more aware of even all these racial tensions happen because people are not aware of the history behind why we are here?

Aarti Shah 17:33
Yeah, I think that's a really important question. I think we're not taught it that much, or definitely when I was growing up. I don't really remember if they did, and if they did, it wasn't that much. And I know there's actually history teacher who's South Asian, and she's saying now she's trying to teach it more than than it was taught before. And I don't know why it's not taught more because it's such an integral part of history, and I think a lot of ignorance and discrimination is down to ignorance and a lack of education. I think if it was taught more than people would actually understand their history and why there are a lot of foreign or foreigners in this country, and it's obviously down to colonisation in Britain. And I think if people knew that, they would be more accepting and understanding of why we're here, not just go back to your own country and that we're sort of taking over. Hmm, what I would have loved to have seen as as a kid as well, in terms of being taught it is more sort of art about it,

more more books being taken to sort of theatre. I think again, when I was younger, there weren't many plays on our history. But I remember when the 'Father and the Assassin' came, I think there were loads of school trips to see that, and that was only recently. And I think if that had been on when we were younger, a lot more people would be educated, especially my generation, as well, about what actually went on in history.

Lata Desai 19:17
You're on a platform. You said, South Asian artists.

Aarti Shah 19:20
Yeah, South Asian artists

Lata Desai 19:21
So do you do you talk to other youngsters your age about their sense of identity and and how do you feel the people's perception are?

Aarti Shah 19:35
Yeah. So actually, just after lockdown, I did a project with the platform, and it was to do with my identity as a South Asian artist. And interestingly enough, a lot of people had similar things in common. For example, when they were younger, a lot of them went to predominantly white schools, and they felt that racism there, and it's the idea of they can embrace who they truly were when they were younger, and they can embrace their identity. And sort of, speaking to a lot of artists, the thing that we all had in common is that we are the ones who want to, as I was saying before represent us in the light that we want to be seen as not the stereotypes that we do see. So to a lot of creatives, that is an important part of our identity, and there were so many shared values when I was sort of conducting these interviews and doing these video projects.

Rolf Killius 20:41
You know, we were talking about the identity early on and and also you said you're British. Asian bit is obvious. But what is the Asian bit?

Aarti Shah 20:53
Yeah, I mean, it's ...

Rolf Killius 20:56
what is important?

Aarti Shah 20:57
Yeah, I guess being South Asian, being Indian, it's about knowing the importance of our culture, and I think recognising that there's so many things to be celebrated. I think one thing that's important is the sense of community that we as South Asians have, that maybe necessarily in other communities isn't as strong. But I think that's one thing that connects us all, is that sense of community and and big families and just all of our sort of celebrations that

bring us together. I think that is one thing that I'm very proud of in terms of the Asian side of my identity, and just just the culture, the sort of festivities, and again, how religion, beliefs and values all sort of intertwine with all of that.

Lata Desai 22:00
And what is the British side of your identity?

Aarti Shah 22:03
I don't know how to...

Lata Desai 22:04
I think you're communicating in English.

Aarti Shah 22:06
Yeah, yeah, of course, yeah, in English. And I guess just the sort of Western that the British values. I think one, I guess one thing when I was, when I was growing up again, one thing that I was embarrassed of is music. I think is very important to me. And I mean, I love my Bollywood music, but I really love sort of the cheesy, I guess, British naughties kind of music, stuff like Queen and Abba and that kind of thing. And I think that has a lot to do with British culture, and I think I sort of was quite embarrassed of that, but now I'm embracing that because it's, you know, I can love that kind of music and that culture as much as someone who doesn't look like me. And I think that music is very important to me in terms of the Bollywood and British sort of side. But yes, it's, it's quite hard one to answer, but, and then you, I guess sometimes you don't know when the two cultures cross over, and what's considered British, what is considered Indian, because both of them can exist at the same time.

Lata Desai 23:11

So you're quite aware of the colonial what happened in Africa. As a youngster who has been brought up in this country. Do you have a fear that history could repeat itself, and then what would happen to you,

Aarti Shah 23:25
of colonisation, specifically?

Lata Desai 23:27
of of chucking people chucking you out of this country.Telling you to go out of your country. Where would you go?

Aarti Shah 23:34
Yeah, I mean, sometimes I always sort of like to have that optimism and hope that that can't happen. I think I do have a lot of faith that I won't be chucked out. However, the the events of what happened in in summer, I never in my life thought we would get as close to that as

again, it reminded me of obviously I wasn't there, but what I know say about National Front and things like that. So I'm not too worried about being chucked out, but I am worried about history repeating itself in terms of the increase of the far right again, because that could happen again, and who knows, especially with the way that politics is going at the moment as well, it's there's so many people who are supporting the far right. So I am worried about that part of history repeating itself over and over again. And I guess that people of colour being scapegoated more so. And I think people feel that fear that they want to remove themselves from this country. So in a sense, people are being forced, because they're being made to feel so fearful that they don't belong, that they're like, I actually want to move out of this country. So, yeah, I do think that could happen.

Lata Desai 24:48
Do you have any thoughts on what should change in society at the moment? Obviously, you talked about accepting you as a South Asian actress and. And do you have any hopes for future, fears or challenges?

Aarti Shah 25:09
Yeah, I guess, in terms of hopes, I would love to see more politicians who, personally, I guess, represent my values and a lot of values that my generation, my family, my friends, a lot of us believe, because at the moment, we are seeing so many people who look like us in positions of power that I don't necessarily resonate with. And you would think, in this day and age, oh my god, there's someone who looks like me in a position of power, and they're going completely against what I believe. So I would love to see more politicians that look like me, that actually represent me. Yeah, just education. More of our history and again, colonisation, South Asian history being taught in schools, seeing it in museums. More art about it, more school trips to see things like this, and yeah, just again in representation. I want to see our history migration being told in the right way. I've not seen much actually to do with the migration from India to Africa to the UK. And actually, when I did Exodus, the play a couple of years ago, that was the first time I'd actually been in something and seen something like that. So I would love to see more art and film, TV, theatre that represents us. And I think art is an amazing way to educate people, and if we are seeing that, people are going to open their eyes. So definitely, yeah, education is the way forward for me.

Rolf Killius 26:45
And, of course, the same direction. Do you have any personal wishes for yourself? Not so much for the society what you are aiming at?

Aarti Shah 26:58
Yeah, I think, I mean, I would like to, as an actor, represent that. So as I said, I would love to be in stories that that tell our history, and again, to represent stories where our race isn't centric to the character, because I think again, that's education, because people will just see us as human beings and not, oh, they're this sort of stereotype. And I guess, first, personally, for me, with the South Asian artist platform, I'd love that to grow. And again, just do more projects, have more conversations around South Asian history, South Asian identity, and just

connect people and try and find opportunities for creatives that the industry aren't creative. I want us to all find our own way to represent ourselves, because if they're not doing the work, we're going to have to do more of it. Yeah,